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ABSTRACT

This paper examines several recent demographic trends that furnish insights into changing views of women's roles and family arrangements among young people: (1) The rising proportion of women (especially wives with young children) in the labor force, (2) their increasing representation in traditionally "male" occupations, (3) later age at first marriage, (4) the increasing incidence of "non-family" living arrangements, and (5) the decline in family size expectations. These trends indicate a weakening of sex-role stereotypes and greater flexibility in family living arrangements. The present younger generation has been steeped in ideas of sexual equality and in turn promotes them. This change may eventually stimulate the development of a whole new industry--the housework industry--and the desexing of "woman's work" thanks, ironically, to women working. (Authors)

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WORKING WOMEN AND "WOMAN'S WORK": A DEMOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE BREAKDOWN OF SEX ROLES

Peter A. Morrison and Judith P. Wheeler

June 1976

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WORKING WOMEN AND "WOMAN'S WORK":
A Demographic Perspective on the Breakdown of Sex Roles*

by

Peter A. Morrison and Judith P. Wheeler
The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif. 90406

Writing in 1928, George Bernard Shaw applauded the fact that thanks to birth control measures and the contributions of commerce and industry to lightening women's work of "baking and brewing, spinning and weaving," women were increasingly seen in business and the professions. Nevertheless, he contended, "because the bearing and rearing of children, including domestic housekeeping, is woman's natural monopoly," men must remain in the vast majority in those other areas "so long as our family arrangements last."**

Both the stereotypical view of woman's "natural" role and our "family arrangements" lasted until just recently. Over the past decade or so, some of the influences Shaw noted 50 years ago plus some new ones have been working to reduce that "vast majority." Virtually foolproof contraception and the legalization of abortion, the civil rights and feminist movements along with legislation they spawned, and the awareness bred of mass communications, not to speak of microwave ovens, have all contributed to the weakening of sex-role stereotypes and the widening of choice in occupations and private life.

The proportion of women in the labor force has grown steadily from 34 percent in 1962 to 40 percent in 1975, and women's representation in "male" strongholds has risen notably during the same period:***

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*An extension of remarks by the first author at the 1976 Executives' Symposium of St. Mary's College, "Future Shock and the Businessman," Moraga, California, February 5, 1976.

**George Bernard Shaw, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1928), pp. 175-6.

***Stuart H. Garfinkle, "Occupations of Women and Black Workers, 1962-74," *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 98, No. 11, November 1975, Table 3; Gloria P. Green, "Employment Data for Detailed Occupations, 1975," *Employment and*

- Garage workers and gas station attendants: women were 1 in 70 in 1962 but now make up 1 in 20
- Mail carriers: up from 1 in 35 to 1 in 11
- Taxicab drivers: from 1 in 27 then to 1 in 11 now
- Nonfarm laborers: 1 in 40 to 1 in 12

Changes in professional and technical occupations included:

- Physicians: up from 1 in 18 to 1 in 8
- Lawyers and judges: from 1 in 36 to 1 in 14

In these professions, where there is a production lead time of several years, the entering classes of students foreshadow greater change. By fall 1975, women were 24 percent of first-year medical students (compared with 9 percent in 1969) and 27 percent of first-year law students.*

Among the traditionally "female" occupations, some gained in the proportion of women, others lost. Bank tellers rose to 91 percent female from 72 percent in 1962 and secretaries and typists remained overwhelmingly female, but the proportion of female librarians, elementary school teachers and telephone operators was slightly down over the period.

Perhaps more significant, though, than the undeniably piquant sight of women at the bottom of mines, the top of telephone poles and in the ranks of police, firefighters, and the military academies is the change in what Shaw called our "family arrangements."

More people are postponing or even abandoning marriage: In the 20-24 age bracket when most men and women have traditionally married, 60 percent of men and 40 percent of women were still single in 1975. These figures compare with 53 percent and 28 percent in 1960. Singles groups for all ages seem to have lost some of their forlorn flavor,

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Earnings, Vol. 22, No. 7 (January 1976), Table 2. A useful source of related statistics is U.S. Bureau of the Census, *A Statistical Portrait of Women in the U.S.*, Current Population Reports: Special Studies: Series P-23, No. 58, April 1976.

*Sources: *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 234, No. 13, December 29, 1975, p. 1334, Table 11; *Journal of Medical Education*, Vol. 51, No. 2, February 1976, p. 145, Table 1; American Bar Association, Section on Legal Education and Admission to the Bar, *Law Schools and Bar Admission Requirements: A Review of Legal Education and Admission to the Bar, Fall 1975* (forthcoming).

becoming less of a last resort for the marriage-minded and more of an end in themselves.

More people are setting up housekeeping without benefit of clergy and often in odd assortments. In the past five years alone, the number of people choosing "nonfamily" living arrangements (households of one or more unrelated individuals of the same or opposite sex) has doubled in the under-35 age bracket.

More people are having fewer or no children. Surveys reflect a continuing decline in the average number of children that young wives aged 18 to 24 expect to have. The three-child family norm of the mid-1960s has given way to the two-child norm, and there has been a modest increase in the number who expect to remain childless.

Among young women who are married--even those with young children--there has been a phenomenal increase in labor force participation. In 1964, 37 percent of married women in their early twenties were in the labor force; by 1974, the figure was 54 percent. For young women with pre-school children at home, the comparable rise in labor force participation was from 24 to 37 percent. Some of this increase can undoubtedly be attributed to the need for additional family income generated by inflation, but even if all of the increase is du to necessity rather than choice, it still indicates a flexibility in family living that has not been present before.

Whether these demographic statistics point to the ultimate fulfillment of feminist--and human--aspirations to equality of choice in careers and domestic style is an open question. As Tocqueville observed, "...among democratic nations each new generation is a new people."* The present younger generation has been steeped in ideas of sexual equality and, in turn, promotes them. The results of annual national surveys of college freshmen** show that:

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*Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Vol. II* (New York, Vintage Books, Inc., 1945), p. 62.

**Sources: Alexander W. Astin, et al, *National Norms for Entering College Freshmen--Fall 1966, ACE Research Reports*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1967; Robert J. Panos, et al, *National Norms for Entering College Freshmen--Fall 1967*, Vol. 2, No. 7, 1967; Alexander W. Astin, et al, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1975*, Laboratory for Research on Higher Education, Graduate School of Education, UCLA, n.d.

- In the past eight years, the percentage of freshmen who feel that married women should confine their activities to the home and family has declined from 67 to 37 percent for men and from 44 to 18 percent for women.
- More women than ever before say they plan to obtain a doctorate or an advanced professional degree--17 percent today, compared with 8 percent in 1966.
- 92 percent of all freshmen today favor job equality for women.

But the 1967 percentages are just as instructive as the 1975 ones: Only eight years ago 67 percent of men and 44 percent of women felt that married women should confine their activities to the home and family. And that was in the swinging Sixties, not the Togetherness Fifties. Even now, in the Anything Goes Seventies, the modest gains made so far in redefining "woman's work" and "woman's place" have triggered resistance from antifeminists (*The Total Woman*) and divers opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Assuming, however, that women continue to increase their participation in the labor market and their share of income, the most interesting result may be--at last--the answer to The Woman Question--that is, "But who's going to do the housework?" As economist Estelle James explains, "As wages rise for women due to sexual integration, and their participation in the market sector rises, one important consequence is that their production in the household sector will fall...Some of the housewife's services will simply disappear from the household's standard of living. Others will be replaced by substitutes from the market sector...Familiar examples of such substitutes include prepared foods, commercial housecleaners, and nurseries. Thus, the structure of demand and productivity in the market sector will shift if large numbers of women enter the labor force."*

The effect of women taking jobs outside the household is to provide both an incentive to industrialize the last great cottage industry

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*Estelle James, "Effects of Women's Liberation," in Cynthia B. Lloyd, ed., *Sex, Discrimination, and the Division of Labor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), pp. 389-390.

and the means to pay for doing so. One alternative--to pay women for doing their own housework--is an idea hatched before its time, judging from the amount of incredulity it arouses.

Perhaps we can look forward, then, to the development of a whole new industry--the housework industry--and the final desexing of "woman's work" thanks, ironically, to women working.

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